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Uganda: Arbitrary detention of three land rights defenders

On 25 February 2020, land rights defenders **Godfrey Ssebisolo**, **Erias Wanjala** and **Fred Mwawula** were arrested by Kiryandongo police. They were later transferred to Dyanga prison in Kiryandongo district, where they have been subjected to severe beatings and other forms of physical abuse by the prison authorities.

[Godfrey Ssebisolo](#), [Erias Wanjala](#) and [Fred Mwawula](#) are land rights defenders from Kisalanda village, located in the Kiryandongo district of Uganda. They mobilise local communities to defend their land rights and oppose the forced evictions perpetrated by the private companies Agilis Partners, Great Season Company Limited and Kiryandongo Sugar Limited, which have been implementing farming projects in the area.

On 25 February 2020, the three land rights defenders were arrested by Kiryandongo police after reporting to the police station as part of their bond requirements. They were later transferred to Dyanga prison in Kiryandongo district without being presented before a magistrate. The prison authorities have subjected them to severe beatings and other forms of physical abuse, which may have amounted to torture.

The arbitrary detention of Godfrey Ssebisolo, Erias Wanjala and Fred Mwawula may be linked to a case previously brought against them. On 12 February 2020, the defenders were arrested at their homes by Kiryandongo police. No statements were collected from them and they were not presented before a court. The police, including the Assistant Superintendent of Police, and representatives of the companies tried to force the defenders to sign documents agreeing to vacate their land in exchange for their freedom. The defenders refused and after seven days in detention at Kiryandongo police station, they were charged with trespassing on private land. On the following day, they were released on bond after a mandatory release order application had been filed before the Kiryandongo Grade One Magistrate on their behalf.

The land rights defenders believe their arbitrary detention is part of a pattern of reprisals for their work opposing forced evictions perpetrated by the companies Agilis Partners, Great Season Company Limited and Kiryandongo Sugar Limited. Local communities have reported that over 35,000 families have been forcibly evicted from their land since 2019, without court orders, consultation or an adequate compensation. Moreover, as reported by local human rights defenders, schools, churches and private health centres in Kiryandongo have been destroyed, and community members have been subjected to harassment and intimidation by agents of the three companies. The affected communities have filed a complaint before the Masindi High Court requesting an immediate order for the Great Seasons Company to cease further evictions of community members, return the land to those evicted and provide adequate compensations for all the human rights violations and destroyed property.

Front Line Defenders is seriously concerned about the arbitrary detention of land rights defenders Godfrey Ssebisolo, Erias Wanjala and Fred Mwawula, the charges brought against them, and the severe physical abuse they have been subjected to by the prison authorities, which may have

amounted to torture. It believes that these acts form part of a pattern of harassment directly linked to their peaceful and legitimate activities defending land rights.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Uganda to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally release Godfrey Ssebisolo, Erias Wanjala and Fred Mwawula, and drop the charges against them, as Front Line Defenders believes that they are being held solely as a result of their legitimate and peaceful activities defending land rights;
2. Provide Godfrey Ssebisolo, Erias Wanjala and Fred Mwawula with medical treatment, if necessary, and ensure that their treatment, while in detention, adheres to the conditions set out in the 'Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment', adopted by UN General Assembly resolution 43/173 of 9 December 1988;
3. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the physical abuse of Godfrey Ssebisolo, Erias Wanjala and Fred Mwawula by the prison authorities, which may have amounted to torture, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
4. Investigate reports of forced evictions, harassment and intimidation of communities in the Kiryandongo district, and adopt immediate measures to ensure their protection;
5. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Uganda are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including harassment and threats.